



Norway

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, the state church, enjoys some benefits not available to other faiths.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 150,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 4.5 million. Citizens are considered to be members of the state church unless they explicitly associate themselves with another denomination; 86 percent of the population (approximately 3.9 million persons) nominally belongs to the state church. However, actual church attendance is considered to be rather low.

Other religious groups operate freely and include various Protestant Christian denominations (152,975; 3.9 percent of the population), Muslims (77,857; 1.9 percent), and Roman Catholics (46,308; 1.2 percent). Buddhists, Jews, Orthodox, Sikhs, and Hindus are present in very small numbers, together comprising less than 1 percent of the population. The Norwegian Humanist Association--the only national organization for those who do not formally practice any religion, including atheists--has 69,610 registered adult members and claims 10,000 children as associate members. Persons cannot register as full members until they reach adulthood. The Government estimates that an additional 5.6 percent of the population (roughly 252,000 persons) does not formally practice religion.

The majority of European and American immigrants, who make up approximately half of the foreign-born population, are either Christian or nonreligious, with the notable exception of Muslim refugees from Bosnia and Kosovo. Most non-Western immigrants practice Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, or Hinduism. Foreign missionaries and other religious workers operate freely in the country.

Forty-two percent of the country's religious minorities are concentrated in the Oslo metropolitan area, including 76 percent of the country's Muslims and the country's entire Buddhist community.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway is the state church. It is supported financially by the State, and there is a constitutional requirement that the King and at least one-half of the Cabinet belong to this Church. Church officials and some politicians have spoken in favor of a greater separation in the state-church relationship. In 2002, the Government appointed an official State-Church Commission to review the future of the state-church relationship. The commission has its own secretariat and has members from several parts of society, including different church groups and other religions, politicians, legal experts, and the Sami people. The commission is expected to present its assessment to Parliament at the end of 2005.

A religious community is required to register with the Government only if it desires state support, which is provided to all registered denominations in accordance with their membership.

There are no special licensing or registration requirements for foreign religious workers. Foreign religious workers are subject to the same visa and work permit requirements as other foreign workers.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

A 1995 law introduced a course for grades 1-10 (ages 6-16) that covers world religions and philosophy and promotes tolerance and respect for all religious beliefs; however, based on the country's history and the importance of Christianity to society, the course devotes more time to Christianity. All children must attend this mandatory class, and there are no exceptions for children of other faiths; on special grounds, students may be exempted from participating in or performing specific religious acts such as church services or prayer, but they may not forgo instruction in the subject. Organizations for atheists as well as Muslim communities have contested the legality of forced religious teaching. These organizations have contested the teaching of the subject in the courts, claiming that it is a breach of freedom of religion and parents' rights to provide religious instruction to their children. In 2002, the Humanist Association appealed the case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. In November, 2004, the European Court of Human Rights decided that the practice of a mandatory religious class broke with human rights principles. In response, the Government made necessary changes to meet the European Court of Human Rights remarks, such as changing legislation to emphasize that the course is not religious preaching. The Government intends to work out a new curriculum for the course in which the rules for exemption will be made easier. These changes will be implemented in the 2005-6 school year.

In the past, Muslims have encountered some difficulties in obtaining local permission to build mosques in areas where Muslims are concentrated. Since 1975, the town council in Drammen had regularly turned down applications to build a mosque. However, in 2004, the Muslim community in Drammen received permission to build a mosque. No other problems with permission to construct mosques have been recorded.

The Workers' Protection and Working Environment Act permits prospective employers to ask job applicants who are applying for positions in private schools, religious schools, or day care centers, whether they agree to teach and behave in accordance with the institutions or religion's beliefs and principles.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. A Cooperation Council for Faith and Secular Society includes the state church and other religious communities, including the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and secular humanist communities. The Oslo Coalition for Freedom of Religious Beliefs works to facilitate closer coordination and international cooperation on religious freedom issues, and supports projects in China, Central Asia and the Caucasus, and Indonesia aimed at developing contacts in the countries, fostering dialogues on interreligious understanding and establishing NGOs with representatives from different religions. The Ecumenical Council of Christian Communities has been active in promoting cooperation within the Christian community. There also has been cooperation between the various religious communities on human rights issues in the past several years. Bilateral dialogue between the state church and the Muslim and Jewish communities has generated statements in support of minority rights and human rights.

Jews had reported that anti-Semitic incidents doubled from 2002 to 2003. The majority of the 40 reported incidents in 2003 involved verbal harassment of primary and secondary Jewish students by non-Jewish students. A small number of incidents involved threats against Jews. There were no reports of anti-Semitic violence or vandalism in 2004.

The Government is vigilant in fighting anti-Semitism and promoting religious tolerance. In April 2004, Prime Minister Bondevik met with two Jewish children who had been harassed on the basis of their religion and, at the conclusion of the meeting, issued a strong public statement condemning anti-Semitism and calling on the public to fight anti-Semitism more actively.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In 2004, the U.S. Embassy sponsored the participation of a U.S. constitutional law expert in an Oslo Coalition seminar on religious freedom.

Released on November 8, 2005

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)